DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 087 055 CS 500 561

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TITLE Suggestion in Oral Performance: A Shadow of an Image.
PUB DATE May 73
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the Annual Doctoral Honors Seminar in Interpretation, "The Phenomenon of Performance," (1st, Northwestern University, School of Speech, May 9-11, 1973)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS Expressive Language; Figural Aftereffects; *Figurative Language; Films; Imagery; *Imagination; *Interpretive Reading; *Literary Analysis; Literature; Perception; *Sensory Experience
IDENTIFIERS *Performance (Dramatic)

ABSTRACT

Oral performance of literature can be compared with film viewing, in that both are strongly based on suggestion, which forces the spectator to participate actively in the creation of images. Film is actually a series of still pictures, but persistence of vision produces the idea of motion in the mind. Likewise, literature in performance involves verbal images from which emerge suggestions which produce the literary images in the auditor's consciousness, and the experience is completed in his mind. The power of suggestion is the interpreter's primary aid for indirect communication of literary meaning and feeling, just as it aids the mime in his evocation of physical objects. The creative oral performance of literature consists of a combination of facial, bodily, and vocal actions, with the addition of the "dynamic characteristics" of suggestion which are all translated by the auditor in terms of his own experience and imagination. The film/viewer and the writer/reader/audience relationships both involve the spectator's mind and emotions in the performing process. (RN)

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SPEECH COMMUNICATION ASSOCIATION

THE PHENOMENON OF PERFORMANCE

Papers presented at the first

DOCTORAL HONORS SEMINAR

IN

INTERPRETATION

The School of Speech
Northwestern University
Evanston, Illinois

May 9-11, 1973

CS 500 561

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Suggestion in Oral Performance:

A Shadow of An Image*

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by

James A. Pearse
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> "There is an outer eye that observes, and there is an inner eye that sees." Robert Edmond Jones

The oral performance of literature seeks to activate the auditor's "inner eye" in a manner analogous to film. The writer/reader/audience and film/viewer relationships both draw their strength from suggestion, which compels the spectator to participate actively in the creation of either literary or filmic images. In The Province of Expression, S. S. Curry delares:

> It is the delicate suggestion that awakens the imagination and touches the fountain of feeling. Not only does the speaker's own feeling depend upon imagination; it is necessary to awaken the imagination of his auditors. A speaker cannot give his emotions to his fellow-men, but he can awaken their own.1

More recently, Jeré Veilleux describes suggestion in terms of the "imaging process." Projection of this process to the auditor distinguishes the performing art of interpretation, asserts Veilleux:

> In fact, interpretation is the only performing art that attempts primarily to evoke and to enhance the imaging capacities of its audience; it is the interpreter's ability to do so that makes him an artist.2

*Slightly revised after presentation.

Suggestion works in a similar manner in film. According to Susanne Langer, Sergei Eisenstein

> believed that the beholder of a film was somewhat specifically called on to use his imagination, to create his own experience of the story. Here we have, I think, an indication of the powerful illusion the film makes not of things going on, but of the dimension in which they go on--a virtual creative imagination; for it seems one's own creation, direct visionary experience, a "dreamed reality."3

Film achieves "that great power of inner creative excitement" which occurs when art projects life upon man's imagination, because the cinema "obliges spectators themselves to create."[4] Through an examination of how suggestion operates in film, an interpreter may gain, therefore, a greater understanding of how suggestion functions in oral performance.

In 1916, writing about the psychology of the silent film, Hugo Munsterberg states:

> We do not see the objective reality, but a product of our own mind which binds the pictures together. . . . The photoplay can show in the intertwined scenes everything which our mind embraces. . . . Finally, we saw that every shade of feeling and emotion which fills the spectator's mind can mold the scenes in the photoplay until they appear the embodiment of our feelings.5

Suggestion provides the effect which produces a "product of our own mind" in the film viewer. The suggestive nature of film causes

> the motion which [the spectator] sees [to appear] to be a true motion, and yet [it] is created by his own mind. The afterimages of the successive pictures are not sufficient to produce a substitute for the continuous outer stimulation; the essential condition is rather the inner mental activity which unites the separate phases in the idea of connected action.6

This sense of connected action stems from the physiological principle of persistence of vision on which the film operates. Motion pictures embody no literal motion. A series of still photographs is projected at a speed calculated to play on a defect in man's optical sense. The retina retains

an image for 1/10th of a second after the actual light stimulus is removed. This time of persistence of vision allows one still photograph to replace another in front of the projection lamp. The eye fails to detect the darkness created when a gate closes in front of the lamp to allow the projector to pull the next photograph into place. In every sixty minutes spent watching a film, approximately twenty minutes are spent in this total darkness. But persistence of vision produces the idea of motion in the mind, and the darkness goes unnoticed.

Though an actual image physically appears in front of the eye for a time, the meaning of the image manifests itself behind the eye in the mind. André Bazin resolves this paradox by stating "the meaning is not in the image, it is in the shadow of the image projected by montage onto the field of consciousness of the spectator."[7] The oral interpreter, similarly, presents the shadow of the image of literature in front of his auditor's mind. Thus, the "essential condition" of oral performance becomes that of the auditor's "inner mental activity." Suggestion projects the image of literature onto his consciousness; he then completes the experience in his own mind.

As with film, interpretation endeavors to arouse in the auditor "that great power of inner creative excitement" which produces a "product of our own mind" and can "mold the scenes" presented in order to embody "everything which our mind embraces." Arnold Berleant acknowledges that literature as a spoken art "offers not meaning but a word experience, and as such does not give us symbols to be understood but rather images to be perceived."[8] Literature in performance becomes, as it were, "a verbal image, where sound evokes sight and together they form a world of imagination that surpasses the ordinary world around us, which is looked at but

is unseen."[9]

In The Sound, Sense, and Performance of Literature, Don Geiger explains how, through behavioral synecdoches, the oral reader "translates or 'reproduces' the linguistic activity of the written scenes into bodily activity"[10] which aids the creation of the "verbal image." These synecdoches suggest a total "pattern of behavior" to the auditor by "the projection of some aspect of this pattern."[11] Geiger cites a reading from Death in Venice in which Aschenbach's total confusion and loss of control during his pursuit of Tadzio were expressed precisely by a behavioral synecdoche that does not appear in the literature:

> "He hesitated, sought after self-control. . . ." At this point in his reading, the oral interpreter rapidly licked his lips with the tip of his tongue. The written passage, of course, makes no mention of this; yet it seems to be an unusually appropriate gesture to suggest Aschenbach's agitation. In his search for self-control, we may imagine that Aschenbach becomes for the first time aware of his own state, of how dry his mouth has become, of his whole unpleasant condition. The little nervous licking of his lips suggests Aschenbach's whole physical condition, his self-deprecation, his return to self-awareness.12

Any good artist, according to Curry, "must be a 'maker-see.'"[13] Suggestion, like that which Geiger describes, helps the interpreter in the resolution of this task. It provides the interpreter with his "primary tool for the indirect communication of literary meaning and feeling to the audience."[14] The reader serves as the suggesting agent for the literature in a manner similar to that of the mimest who suggests the creation of perceptual objects. Marianne Simmel discusses Marcel Marceau's use of "dynamic characteristics" of an object, medium, person, emotion, or concept in terms paralleling Geiger's description of behavioral synecdoches. Similar to behavioral synecdoches, "dynamic characteristics" give rise to the spectator's percept."[15]

Simmel defines "dynamic characteristics" as the function, impact, visual or physiognomic aspect of an object. She differentiates "dynamic" from "surface characteristics" such as color or texture.[16] Furthermore, Simmel maintains that "dynamic characteristics" uniquely define the perceptual object which the mimest presents as a "purified product." To create a "purified product" through "dynamic characteristics," the mimest must emphasize and enlarge the striking features of a given action while stripping it of unessentials." Thereby, economy allows smooth transitions from one action to another without leaving the spectator in doubt.[17]

Such economy operates through the interpreter's use of suggestion. An example may be drawn from a performance of Bertolt Brecht's Mother Courage. In the scene given, the Protestant town of Halle is threatened by Catholic troops. When hope of alerting the town seems gone, Kattrin takes a drum from her mother's wagon, mounts the farmhouse roof, and begins beating a warning signal. The Lieutenant pleads with her to cease. She persists, though the soldiers menace the wagon and beat a young peasant in protest. Finally, the Lieutenant orders Kattrin shot. She dies still beating her drum.

The interpreter performing this scene utilized the "dynamic characteristic" of beating a drum to suggest Kattrin's courage, the Lieutenant's orders, the soldier's shot, and Kattrin's death. Each transition from action to action or from character to character was accomplished within the framework of an increasingly rapid and intense stroke. With fists clenched, the interpreter's arms moved, in turn, over her head, and, then, were thrust downward, stopping waist high on each drum beat. The Lieutenant's orders to "throw down that drum!" and "Set it up! Set it up!" (meaning the musket) were done by pointing into the realm of the audience with the

index finger of the left hand as the arm straightened above the head. The gun-shot was projected in a like manner. With the musket blast, the interpreter's pumping arms moved to slow-motion, she bent at the waist, bowed her head, and, finally, folded both arms slowly at the waist.

Of course, the action described above was complemented by a complex of facial, bodily, and vocal tensions which completed the manifold activities of the scene. However, the utilization of the one "dynamic characteristic," the pattern of the stroke, served as the essential connection among all actions and characters while never leaving the audience in doubt. It further provided the suggestion of the mounting noise in the scene that only subsided when Kattrin feebly collapsed after being shot.

The interpreter presents "dynamic characteristics" which suggest the "real"; the auditor translates these characteristics into terms of his own experience and imagination. In this way, suggestion serves the auditor as persistence of vision serves the filmgoer. The mind's eye fails to detect the darkness between projected frames. Suggestion impels the viewer or auditor to complete a sense of the connected action with his own "virtual creative imagination."

Simmel's analysis of Marceau again contributes insights into how the interpreter's suggestion assists "completion" for the auditor. She comments that whatever the mimest portrays--object, medium, person, emotion, or concept--he portrays it in action. But the portrayal suggests more than the surface action represented:

> The representation of the action itself is not independent of the representation of the several other components. In fact, none of the components is independent of the others, even though at any given moment one component may be in the foreground and relatively more important than the others. The performance of the mime ultimately consists of the simultaneous representations of all the components--incredible as this may sound.18

To those familiar with oral interpretation, Simmel's statement does not sound "incredible."

A specific instance of simultaneity and mutual interdependence of components arises in Kenneth Patchen's poem "Street Corner College." Objects of action fuse with abstract concepts to create the tone of alienation that Patchen witnesses in his generation:

> Next year the grave grass will cover us.
>
> Deleted due to copyright
> restrictions.

> Cold stars and the whores.19

In the final stanza, sleepwalkers, knife, stars, and whores are the concrete objects of action which occupy the foreground at various moments. The interpreter will utilize select "dynamic characteristics" of the concrete objects in order to suggest the abstract concepts insulted, desolate, dark and terrible, cold, and solitude.

Simmel points out "that the representations of an action can be created of components that are entirely alien to the 'natural action'--yet they constitute most forceful and convincing representations of such actions."[20] My own performance of the line "Where solitude is a dirty knife at our throats" constructs one such "alien" action to suggest the abstract concept solitude. The performance focuses on certain "dynamic characteristics"

to portray the concept in action. As the line begins, my body droops, weighted down with defeat. My face, I trust, suggests the blank stare of a sleepwalker, and my eyes indicate a trace of fear arising in reaction to the "dark and terrible land" that the speaker of the poem walks. But when solitude appears as a "dirty knife at our throats," I tighten my jaw and jerk my head back. Eyes widen in fear of the "cutting edge." My throat tenses, and my body stiffens and withdraws as one hand brandishes the imagined knife. Vocal response needs to suggest similar tensions during the reading of the line.

In such ways, the interpreter can simultaneously represent the concrete object of attack, the alienated speaker, through bodily response and utterance, and the abstract attacker, solitude, in the gesture connoting the knife. In other words, as Simmel concludes, "the action creates the object and, at the same time, the object created defines the action."[21] Ultimately, it becomes nearly impossible to describe the simultaneity and mutual interdependence of the concrete and abstract actions. The "dynamic characteristics" suggest the persona's cognizance of his alienation. The interpreter projects the components of that cognizance on to the auditor's "inner mental activity." The auditor, through the suggestion offered by the interpreter, then fashions the "real" experience of the literature in his own mind.

The principle of suggestion functions in a like manner in film. According to Eisenstein, the intellectual effects of montage determine "that there is no difference in principle between the motion of a man rocking . . . and the intellectual process [of rocking], for the intellectual process is the same agitation, but in the dominion of the higher nerve center."[22] Munsterberg's description of a spectator's reaction to suggestion in film

defines the dimension of the "virtual creative imagaination" within which both film and oral performance of literature finally act:

> We feel our body adjust itself to the perception. Our head enters into the movement of listening for the sound, our eyes are fixating the point in the outer world. We hold all our muscles in tension in order to receive the fullest possible impression with our sense organs. The lens in our eye is accommodated exactly to the correct distance. In short our bodily personality works toward the fullest possible impression.23

The film/viewer and writer/reader/audience relationships both include the spectator's mind and emotions in the creative process of performance. Understanding this similarity between film and interpretation will enable the oral reader to suggest more ably the shadow of the image of literature. By so doing, the interpreter, as a performing artist, strives to fulfill Curry's mandate to be a "maker-see."

FOOTNOTES

[1]S. S. Curry, The Province of Expression (Boston, 1896), p. 90.

[2]Jeré Veilleux, "Toward a Theory of Interpretation," Quarterly Journal of Speech, 55 (April 1969), 110.

[3]Susanne Langer, "A Note on the Film," in Film: A Montage of Theories, ed. Richard Dyer MacCann (New York, 1966), p. 202.

[4]Sergei Eisenstein, The Film Sense, trans. and ed. Jay Leyda (New York, 1947), p. 35.

[5]Hugo Münsterberg, The Film: A Psychological Study (New York, 1970), p. 74.

[6]Münsterberg, p. 30.

[7]André Bazin, What Is Cinema? (Berkeley, California, 1967), p. 26.

[8]Arnold Berleant, "The Verbal Presence: An Aesthetics of Literary Performance," Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism, 31 (Spring 1973), 341.

[9]Berleant, p. 345.

[10]Don Geiger, The Sound, Sense, and Performance of Literature (Chicago, 1963), p. 100.

[11]Geiger, p. 103.

[12]Geiger, p. 104.

[13]Curry, p. 90.

[14]Jeré Veilleux, Oral Interpretation: The Recreation of Literature (New York, 1967), p. 47.

[15]Marianne Simmel, "Mime and Reason: Notes on the Creation of the Perceptual Object," Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism, 31 (Winter, 1972), 197.

[16]Simmel, p. 197.

[17]Simmel, p. 198.

[18]Simmel, p. 194.

[19]Kenneth Patchen, Collected Poems of Kenneth Patchen (New York, 1967), p. 74.

[20]Simmel, p. 199.

[21]Simmel, p. 199.

[22]Sergei Eisenstein, Film Form, ed. and trans. Jay Leyda (New York, 1949), p. 82.

[23]Münsterberg, pp. 36-7.